

The Structure of the Work of L'Abri

Father, we thank You for the pleasure of being together. We thank You for all You have been teaching us as we have considered the lives of two of Your servants. We thank You for the things we can learn from them. As Paul said about himself, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." We pray, Father, that we may see those things about Francis and Edith Schaeffer's life in which they have been faithful to You and that we may learn from them how we might more faithfully serve You today in our own lives. We pray you will be with us in this time we have together. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In the previous lesson we discussed the official founding of L'Abri, its actual beginning. In this lesson I will talk about how the work of L'Abri is structured—how it was structured from the beginning and how it is still structured today. I will start with saying something about the work and prayer. Prayer has always been central to the work of L'Abri. We noticed that in the previous lesson as we considered the beginning of the work. We saw how the house there, Chalez les Melezes, came to the Schaeffers and how they got the money for the down payment. They had this place to move into in a beautiful location. From the beginning, people started coming. Edith provides much description in both her books, *L'Abri* and *The Tapestry*, as well as in her letters, about how different people came.

From the beginning, prayer was central. There are a couple of things I want to say about that. The first is what Edith calls the "praying family." From the beginning of L'Abri, there was a group of people who committed themselves to praying for the work of L'Abri. It started, as Edith says in *The Tapestry*, with 27 people who received the prayer letters every month that Edith wrote. She set out for this group of people who had promised to pray the things they wanted them to pray for as the work began to develop. In addition to that, there were also from the beginning about 350 people on Edith's family letter list. These were people from the various churches and ministries in which they had been involved in the United States. She wrote those letters much less frequently, maybe every two or three months. She is still writing those letters as I am speaking, although now they are about once every six months. She wrote these family letters to a wider group of people who were interested in hearing about what was happening in their lives and how the work developed. That family letter has grown to a much larger group of people.

Each of the branches of L'Abri has a praying family. There is a praying family for the branch in Switzerland, England, Holland, and so on. There is a group of people who have promised to pray for that work and who then regularly receive prayer letters. It is not easy to get on those lists and stay on them, as anyone who has tried to do so will find out. We were always concerned not to send letters to those who did not want to receive them. That was partly because there are so many Christian groups to people who never asked for them. The Schaeffers believed from the beginning that it was important to keep in contact with those people who wanted contact. In particular, it was important for those who were praying faithfully to be kept up with news and information for their prayers. At the same time, they did not want to send letters to people who really did not want to receive them. What has happened in the last few years is that each branch regularly sends out a card that says if you want to continue receiving the letter then you have to send the card back. So it will actually take an effort by the person if he wants to continue receiving it. Nobody has an interest in sending prayer letters to people who are not going to pray.

The praying family was always tremendously important to the Schaeffers. They regarded the praying family to be laborers in the work of L'Abri as the Schaeffers were in doing the work in their home in Switzerland. They tried to communicate that in their letters, and they really believed it. Edith believes that until this day. The work is completely dependent on people praying for it. That praying family may include some person in a small rural

town in Ohio or somebody else in Australia or somebody else in Germany or some family somewhere that is praying for the work.

Second, as we think about prayer there, from early on in the work, each Monday was set aside as a day of prayer for the work itself. That was when members of the praying family usually prayed in particular for the work as well, although obviously there were people who prayed every day. Yet many people pray as the various branches do, which is particularly each Monday of the week. The Schaeffers' middle daughter, Susan, had the idea just after the work started of dividing each day of prayer up into half-hour periods. People then signed up so there would be a chain of prayer all through the day for the work of L'Abri. Each of the branches also has that pattern up to the present time. Each Monday morning there is a time of prayer at breakfast. Then a list is put up for anyone to sign up to pray. It is not because anyone wants to check up on who is praying, but rather as a commitment to have people praying all the way through the day for the work of each branch of L'Abri as well as the other needs that people may have who happen to be there at the time. Each of the branches has kept a list, or a book, of all the prayer requests that have been written down each Monday.

Where I worked, it is now several books thick of sheets of paper that have answers to prayer, items of praise, and requests for prayer. It is amazing to look back at those prayers over the years and see the prayers that God has answered over that time. It is a helpful practice to keep a record of how God has answered your prayers, because we all have such short memories. We easily forget what God has done for us. It is helpful to have a record there in which we set it there, think about it, and see written out the things that we have prayed for and do not think about anymore because God has answered them so many years or months ago. We all forget those things so easily. That was something that was part of the work from the beginning, keeping the lists of prayers and answers of prayers as well. So each Monday was set aside as a day of prayer.

What was being prayed for? The Schaeffers wanted to set the work up to be a demonstration that God answers prayer and that God exists. It was so that all those who came through the branches could see that God is answering prayers today. He is not one confined to the pages of the Bible or to the Christian histories of the past. The areas they chose to pray for included first the work's financial needs. They never had any kind of endowment or guaranteed income. There are some people who give to L'Abri month by month, but there are not many. The great majority of gifts that have come in over the years have been individual gifts from people whom the Lord has laid it upon their hearts to give to the work. So that was the first area of prayer, praying for the financial needs.

One of the amazing things to consider is that, with the number of people who know about the work of L'Abri now and the number of people who have been helped by it, and the number of quite wealthy Christians who know about the work, yet it has never received any kind of endowment or guaranteed support. That has been particularly interesting to those of us who were in it. It was not that we wanted that, because the work was set up to pray that God would provide the needs of the work now as a demonstration of His existence. So nobody has ever given enormous gifts to the work that would have been enough for them to live on for the next two or three years or any kind of capital fund that they could draw interest from. There has never been anything like that. Every month in every branch there are gifts from \$5 up to \$500 or \$1000 from all kinds of people from all different places, and it all adds up to meet the needs of the work.

There was only one time in the history of the work when they had what you could call a "cushion" that would have enabled them to continue the work for up to six months if they stopped receiving gifts. That was at the time when Schaeffer had written many books and the royalties from those books were coming in. The Schaeffers gave their royalties to L'Abri completely. So there was a patch when *How Shall We Then Live* and *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* came out when there would have been enough funds in the bank for them to live on for six months if no more funds came in day by day. Yet throughout most of the history of the

work, it was not like that, and it is not like that today. The work is in the same situation today as it was in the beginning in 1955. The branches are completely dependent on the gifts that are given to them month by month. There is no backlog or cushion, and there has not been for a considerable time. It was only a short time that there was any kind of cushion. The work has never received any kind of support that would enable it to be cut loose from being dependent on God. That is what they asked for, and that is what God gave them. They had the desire to be a demonstration that He will provide for them daily.

They desired that if they reached a point that the work was no longer pleasing to Him or if He wanted the work to close, then He would stop providing for them. That was something that was prayed very seriously. They desired that God would discipline them or the work or that He would show them that it was time to come to a close by stopping to provide for their needs. Yet He has continued to provide.

It is always an amazement to those of us who were in the work to see those needs met. I was the treasurer for many years for the English branch. We never paid a bill late. We sometimes paid ourselves a short salary, but we always paid every bill to anybody outside on time every month. We were always able to do that, and it was an amazing thing. Any work like that is tremendously expensive. It began with only the Schaeffers and their family, but it has grown from there

So that was the first thing for which they prayed, that God would provide materially for the work and that they would be a demonstration in that area. The second was that God would bring people to them. They prayed that they would not have to advertise to encourage people to come but that God would bring people to them who would be the people of His choice. And they prayed that He would keep other people away. They prayed that at each of the branches, first at their branch in Switzerland and then at the various other branches as they developed.

It has been amazing to see how people come. Working in that English branch for so many years, it was always interesting to ask people how they came. People came in so many different ways. Many came through individuals they had met back home who told them about the work of L'Abri. It would be somebody from their church, somebody from their family, or a friend would encourage them to come. Often people would become Christians there and then go back home and send their friends who were not Christians. Then they would come to the branches. People who had been helped would send others to be helped. Later on, sometimes people would come who had read some of the books. They thought, "Here are answers that I can find that I have not been able to find anywhere else." So they went to find out if they could be helped. Other times it has been people who have met someone on a train or something like that.

I recently talked with a man who came to speak at a chapel service here at the seminary, and it was interesting to hear his story. He is a missionary in Marseilles with Mission to the World. He had been in the United States forces in Germany, and then he stayed in Europe. He was a rebellious and radical person, and he did all kinds of crazy things. Somebody he knew had given him the address of L'Abri but without telling him it was a Christian place. He was on his way to Israel, and he just stopped in. That has happened with many people who have turned up at the various branches without knowing it was a Christian place. They did not even know they were going to be interested in the Gospel. Yet God brought them there. Hugh told me what a difficult time he gave everybody and how obnoxious he was when he went there. He said he began by asking, "What is this place?" Someone answered, "This is a Christian community." Then he said, "I am not interested in Christianity. I do not want to stay here." So the man said, "We would not be interested either, except that we think that it is absolutely true." Hugh said, "There are not any absolute truths." Then the man replied to him, "But you are saying there are. You are saying there are absolutely no absolutes. At least we have something we can begin to talk about." That intrigued Hugh enough to stay for a day or two. He continued extending that, staying for another day after

another, and he eventually became a Christian. He is now a missionary in France, and he has a French wife. His wife was converted there, too. She is from Paris.

One could multiply the stories of people who have come in all kinds of ways like that. It could be through meeting somebody who gave them a lift when they were hitchhiking. It could be through meeting somebody on a train or whatever it happened to be. Then they might turn up at L'Abri.

Many people believed that it was their last chance. I remember a young couple from New Zealand who came and said that they had determined that if they did not get help then they would go away and commit suicide. They had it planned exactly how they were going to do it. They had reached the end of everything. When people come to you like that, you have a tremendous sense of urgency. You feel that you must say something to them that will help in their situation.

So that was the second area of prayer, that God would bring the people of His choice to the work. It was again to demonstrate that He was Lord over the work. The third area, which came later on, was praying that God would bring people to help them, people of His choice. Again, they would not go out seeking staff. They prayed that God would provide the people He wanted to work with them. As the years went by and the work developed, one of the practical ways they operated was to say that if somebody wanted to come and join the work then they would have to pay their own way to come. They were to pray that God would provide that for them if they did not have it, as a sign that they should come to join the work. L'Abri never had the kind of funds to pay for people to travel from one continent to another to see whether they would like to work there or not.

I ought to say something about how people become workers. Over the years, many people who read about or heard about L'Abri have wanted to work there. We would often receive letters from people saying they wanted to work with us. The reply they would almost always get was that we would like them to stay with us and be a student for a while, because people can have quite unrealistic ideas about what it is like. Christians can be as romantic as anyone else can be about things. So we would encourage people that if they were serious they should come for a while and study for three months. Then if they wanted to stay they could help out in the work for six months. Then they could decide whether they wanted to apply to be a worker. There was nobody who was taken on without really knowing them. In that kind of work, where you are working closely together, it is essential that you have complete confidence in each other, that the person who is working knows exactly what he is doing and why he is doing it, and that you have a shared vision of what you ought to do. Moreover, you do not need people who say they have many wonderful gifts but rather people who are prepared to be practical servants. We were always interested in finding out if a person was interested in serving other people, coming alongside of people. Is the person prepared to talk to individuals? Or is this a person who thinks he has to be up front or in the public eye? Is this person prepared to serve? Is it someone who is prepared to do the dishes at midnight or sweep the corridors or get alongside the person who is in trouble and be a help? He or she must be a servant kind of person.

That was the third area of their prayers, that God would provide people who would help them in their work. Their daughter Priscilla was the first worker, as Edith recounts in *The Tapestry*. Then Dorothy Jamieson, who became Dorothy Woodson, was the second worker in L'Abri. That was already in the first year of 1995 that both of them helped out in the work.

The fourth area was praying for God to have His hand over the direction of the work. As well as bringing people, He should give them His work to do. It is related to praying for God to bring them His people, but this was praying for God to give them His work to do. Of all the speaking engagements that I had when I was working in the English L'Abri for 18 years, I never sought any of them. They were all set up by people who

wrote to us and asked if we would do something for them. That is how the work has always come about. It has been responding to the needs that God lays on the hearts of those there.

Not everybody who works at L'Abri is a teacher, and not everybody is required to be a teacher. If you were to ask my wife, for example, "Do you have the gift of teaching? Did you lead discussions, seminars, and Bible studies?" She would say, "Certainly not. I have never thought of those kinds of things as my gift." I met her there when she was working already at the Swiss L'Abri as a single person. She was working as Schaeffer's secretary. There are many different kinds of people working in L'Abri. Some of the men and some of the women are gifted teachers, but not all of them are. While it has been necessary to have people at each of the branches who can teach God's Word and who can give lectures on contemporary issues that people are thinking about, the work has never gone out to seek people like that. Nor have they encouraged the people who came through the branches and were gifted in those areas to stay. We have always tried to practice faith that God would provide people. If there is a person whom we think would be helpful, then we pray that God would lay it on his or her heart rather than that we would lay it on that person's heart. We want the people that He wants rather than the people that we think would be good.

As I look back at the way various people have joined L'Abri, I can think of myself as an example. I went to Switzerland in 1967. I had been a Christian for only six months at that time. I went there originally for two weeks. I had just graduated from university. I decided to go because of the person I was converted through, who was a Canadian and had spent some time at the Swiss L'Abri and played tapes by Schaeffer in his flat on Saturday nights. I did not know what I wanted to do. When I became a Christian, my whole life had turned upside down. My friend suggested that I go to Switzerland for a couple of weeks. I went the day after I graduated. I was hitchhiking. I got a lift from a place about 15 miles from my parents' home in the south of England almost to Basel in Switzerland, on one lift. It was amazing. I was a very young Christian. I did not have much idea about L'Abri. I only planned to stay there for a couple of weeks. I had been helped tremendously by Schaeffer's tapes and what Mike had shared about him and his ideas. I had started off from home about 8 o'clock in the morning. I had been dropped after my first lift on a little side road outside a small town in the south of England that had hardly any traffic. It was not a main road going anywhere. I thought it was hopeless as I stood there for over an hour. Somebody came by to pick me up, and he turned out to be a young Christian from Cambridge University who just heard Schaeffer lecturing there to a group of Christians a few weeks before. This is an amazing example of God's providence and care. He was going to Vienna, and he took me almost all the way to Switzerland. We went across the south of England to Dover, then across the channel, and then through Belgium. We stayed overnight in a youth hostel. He drove me along the Rhine through Germany and dropped me off just before the border to Switzerland. Then he went off to Austria. That was how I got to Switzerland. I thought, "Maybe God really wants me to come to this place. I got there and I had planned to stay for a couple of weeks. I ended up staying for a year and becoming Mrs. Schaeffer's cook and gardener.

I had no idea at that time, and neither did they, that I would become a teacher there. I was a shy person, and the idea of speaking to a group of more than one person was completely outside of my imagination. I was extremely shy and completely reluctant to think of any kind of context of teaching. It never occurred to me that I would be in any kind of situation teaching anywhere. My wife was there as Schaeffer's secretary, and we were married in the middle of that year. Then I came here to Covenant Seminary. Even then I had no intention of getting involved in any kind of teaching ministry. I wanted to grow in my own understanding of God's Word, and I wanted to communicate to individuals, not to groups. Then I went back to work in the English L'Abri in 1971 when it began. My teaching ministry developed from there.

There are many people who are now teaching in the work of L'Abri who when they first joined the work neither they nor anybody else had any idea that they would develop into people who could lecture, take discussions, or

preach. There are also many people who have come through the work who are already gifted and trained, but L'Abri does not ask them to stay. If they say they want to join, then obviously we think about that. Yet the work has not developed by seeking people out who are gifted. It has been seeking God's direction.

It is important to say that the Schaeffers never suggested that this was the only way that Christians should operate, either in terms of getting financial support or the people you minister to or the people who work for you. They actually argued that the opposite was true. They believed that God was calling them to set the work up in this way. In these areas they would be a demonstration that God answers prayer. They said very carefully that they did not think that it was wrong to try to raise funds or go out to try to reach people. They did not think it was wrong to get people to work for you.

As I think of myself as a minister of a church there in England, I was constantly wearing two hats. As a minister, we would have special collections for various needs, such as a family in Ethiopia or somebody's mission in Mali in West Africa. We would encourage people to give to that. We were raising money in that sense. As a minister, I was involved in actively going out and proclaiming the Gospel in our community and seeking to reach out to people. As a minister, you think carefully about who is going to join you on the staff at your church. You have no hesitation to approach people in your church and say, "You are gifted in this area. Would you be prepared to do this work?" One may say that, in a way, the way L'Abri operates is quite abnormal. It is not the way that churches are encouraged to operate in the New Testament, but L'Abri is not a church. If it was, then it would not operate the way that it does.

In each of these areas the Schaeffers believed this was how God developed the work for them. They believed He was calling them to develop the work in that way. That is why they set it up in this way. They wanted to be a demonstration. They believed it was what God was calling them to do. That is how He had begun the work. He was the one who started sending people to them. He was the one who provided them with the finances to buy the house. They believed He had shown them the pattern of how the work should develop. So that is how it would be, and He has always honored that. That is how the work still runs to this day.

We would sometimes have people who had all kinds of gifts writing and asking if they could join us in the work. The reply they would get would be the same as anybody else. We would say, "Come and be with us a while, and then you can see and we can see. Yet we do not accept people at long distance, because of the kind of work this is. It is not sensible for you or for us." Even then, when somebody does join the work, they make a commitment of only one year, which is open ended on either side. Even once you are a permanent member of the staff there is no contract. I never had a contract. Everyone is free to leave at any point. There is no commitment in that sense. There is obviously commitment to one another and to the work. Yet the work carried on with a real conviction that if God desires to lead us somewhere else then we must be open to that leading. That is why I am here at Covenant Seminary rather than there. This is where I felt He was leading me. That was a huge struggle, of course. When you have been somewhere for 18 years, you do not leave it easily, particularly when it is something that you love doing and the Lord is blessing you in. It is hard to make that kind of move.

How do we maintain a family life while living in community? That is something the Schaeffers wrestled with from the beginning, and Edith makes that clear in *The Tapestry*. She would acknowledge that they made some mistakes in those early years, although they always tried to maintain the separate identity of their family. It was a tremendously important thing for us all.

Some of the most difficult people to help were the children of ministers and missionaries who had been neglected by their parents for the sake of the Gospel. I remember one of our workers, for example, in the Swiss L'Abri for many years, who has recently died. She was not a difficult person, but she was tremendously sympathetic to people with those kinds of problems. At the age of three her parents sailed to India, and she did

not see them again for more than two weeks in the next 18 years. They went off to be missionaries, and at the age of three she was made to stand on the dock with the people she was staying with and sing, "Name Your Blessings, Count Them One by One," as her parents sailed into the distance. When you have had people with those kinds of experiences, they can be rather tough. They can be filled with bitterness toward God, their parents, the church, and toward the Gospel. One of the things we were determined not to do was to sacrifice our children for the sake of the work. Paul tells us that we have to take care of our family. Otherwise we are worse than an unbeliever. Those are his words to Timothy.

We tried to have a time every day when our obligation was only to our family. This was as the work developed. In England, if we did lunch for a number of people, then we would not do supper for people in our home that day. That meant that during the period from 5:30 to 8:00 somebody else would be taking care of them, but they would not be in our home or sitting around our table. Then we would have that time to be with our children and be together as a family. That would be the time when we would read stories together when they were little. When they were older we would do their homework with them and talk with them or do sports with them or whatever else.

From the beginning, Edith always made it a point to set aside time to read to her children every day. I think every family in L'Abri has done that. Either the mother or the father will spend time like that with their children. We all structured that into our daily schedule as something that was essential.

At the beginning there were no days off in the work. Edith makes it clear in *The Tapestry* that they came to regret that later on. By the time I came to the work in 1967, everyone was already having a day off each week. For us as a family, that was an absolute essential. We would often find that we would have to go somewhere else for the day, because it was sometimes difficult to have a day off in your own home. That could be difficult. We would make a point of going and doing something together as a family on that day. I would not take up any responsibilities for somebody else at that time. Edith says in her book *What is a Family?*, "A family is an open door, but it has also got to be a closed door." You actually have to work at that, and anyone who is in any kind of ministry has to work at that. You must say, "There are times when I am with my family, and my responsibility is to them, not to somebody else." You must fulfill that.

Children have a powerful sense of whether you have any time for them or not. They also have a powerful sense of other people's needs. I remember one of my boys coming to me when he was only three. He said, "Daddy, there is that man at the door who always needs you." That was a totally acute observation of this particular person who always needed somebody else. Children can see things quite clearly. That was the other thing that could be difficult. When you have all kinds of people sitting at your table each day, little children can be quite straight in what they think. They come right out with it. It can be something like, "Why do you have a nose like that?" or "Why do you eat like that?" Yet we all worked hard making sure we had sufficient time with our children.

We obviously had many people coming to stay with us whose lifestyle was destructive to themselves and would have been destructive to our children or anyone else who copied it or got involved in it. There were situations in which one would be aware of the possible dangers to our children. In those situations, you must be practically wise. For example, we had a man stay with us who had been in court several times for molesting boys. I had three little boys. You must be careful. You must be as wise as serpents, as Jesus said. You always have to hope all things, that God has brought this person here to change him, transform him. At the same time, you must be wise and sensible. You do not let that man take your children for a walk. He did take two of my boys for a walk one day without my knowledge when they were quite small. Vicki and I almost had a nervous breakdown until he got back. It was overwhelming. We simply prayed for God's protection in that kind of situation. Thankfully it was fine. Obviously you can get yourself in difficult situations. We often had people on drugs who were still

on drugs when they came. We had people who were very violent. I remember a guy who went into the basement to sniff glue. He was part of a Hell's Angels gang, a motorcycle gang. He went to the basement to sniff glue one day, and he was a big strong man anyway, but he went wild. It took three big men to restrain him. Sometimes you would have people who, because of the state they were in psychologically, were not very responsible. I remember when the fire was not burning very well in the living room and a man got a can of petrol and threw it on the fire. Flames leapt out of the fire back into the can.

So you pray for God's protection because you get people doing crazy things. God really has protected people in the branches. He has protected the children of those in the branches. You know that if you are going to be doing the work that God has called you to do you do not take it for granted. You must pray urgently. You must work at protecting your children. Yet I think it was a healthy experience for our children. They grew up in a protected environment in one sense. We provided love for them and care for them and gave them security. At the same time, they were completely surrounded since they were little with people with all kinds of problems asking every kind of difficult question that you can imagine. The children could hear them every day. In that sense they were not protected at all. I do not think it hurt them in the slightest. I am not a believer in putting children in a situation in which they never hear any idea opposed to the Gospel or in which they never meet people who are opposed to the Gospel or whose lifestyle is destructive. If you are providing a strong family basis for them, giving them love, teaching them what is right, being an example to them, and being practically careful in terms of not letting them into dangerous situations, then it can be a healthy experience for them to grow up seeing many people with desperate needs who are destroying their lives. They learned at an early age how destructive drugs and alcoholism can be in somebody's life. They learned how destructive violence in a marriage can be. It was not what they saw in us, of course, but what they saw in some of the people coming to stay. They learned early how destructive certain ideas are, in terms of where they leave people. I think that was a healthy experience for them. I do not think it bothered them in the slightest. If you are giving them the love, security, structure, teaching, and example they need, and if you are praying for God to have His hand over them, then it can be a healthy experience for them to see the tremendous needs there are. You are providing shelter in one way. Yet in another way, in the safety of that shelter, they are able to experience all kinds of difficulties, the problems people face, and the questions and doubts that people have. That can be good.